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Anecdotal Insights: Changing Perceptions of Italian Women Artists in Eighteenth-Century Life Stories

Julia K. Dabbs

“Why can’t a woman be more like a man?” Professor Henry Higgins’s androcentric lament from the musical *My Fair Lady* would have resounded with male biographers of the eighteenth century who wrote about the perplexing phenomenon of the woman artist. Since the Renaissance, writers of artistic biographical compendia had characterized the few female artists included in their volumes in distinctly different ways from their male counterparts, mainly due to lingering prejudices concerning the intellectual abilities and societal roles of women. Emulating Castiglione’s vision of the ideal Renaissance lady, biographers such as Giorgio Vasari, Carlo Ridolfi, and Carlo Cesare Malvasia emphasized the physical beauty and chaste virtue of the artist herself, rather than delineating the qualities of her creations.¹ Although she might receive great praise for her housekeeping and musical skills, comments about her artistic talents were typically qualified as being “good for a woman.” Additionally, rather than delving

1 For Baldesar Castiglione’s ideal lady, see *The Book of the Courtier* 211–16. The stereotype of the woman artist is based on Vasari’s “Life of Properzia de’ Rossi” in his *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* 1.856–58; Ridolfi’s life of Marietta Tintoretto in *The Life of Tintoretto* 97–99; and Carlo Cesare Malvasia’s encomium to Elisabetta Sirani in his *Felsina pittrice* 2.385–403.

into their training or development as was commonly done for male artists, women were superficially declared “miracles of nature,”² and thereby placed outside of any genealogy of artistic tradition—even though many were the daughters of artists.

However, in Giovanni de Rossi’s 1810 *Vita di Angelica Kauffmann, pittrice*, a fundamental shift can be evidenced. As Wendy Roworth has argued, a woman artist is here for the first time comprehensively characterized using literary conventions normally reserved for the gifted male artist (209–23). Kauffmann is praised for being an autodidact, whose talent surpassed any potential teacher of her day; in addition, emphasis is placed on her intellectual and imaginative abilities, which de Rossi contrasts to the diligent mimesis of preceding women artists (Roworth 211). His volume is therefore doubly noteworthy, for not only is the *Vita* the first published biographical monograph on a woman artist, but furthermore it reveals that artistic greatness was not delimited by gender.

Yet was de Rossi’s nondiscriminatory approach an isolated phenomenon, or are there precedents in eighteenth-century biographical accounts of women artists that have eluded scholarly examination? Through a consideration of thematic patterns in life stories of the Italian painters Maria Felice Barbò, Giovanna Fratellini, and Rosalba Carriera, this essay will propose that the inception of a paradigm shift regarding the perception of the woman artist might be witnessed in eighteenth-century artistic biography. I will particularly be focusing on anecdotes and topoi relating to the artist’s “discovery,” her physical appearance, and teacher-student relationships, since these allow us to make comparisons to biographical precedents so as to detect changes.

Before proceeding to the texts themselves, we should at least briefly address the potentially controversial topic of anecdotes and historical “truth.” Although some modern-day historians have dismissed anec-

2 Vasari (1.858) relates that the citizens of Bologna regarded the sixteenth-century sculptor Properzia de’ Rossi “as one of the greatest miracles produced by nature in our days.” See also Soprani 306 who states that the Anguissola sisters were “miraculously intelligent.”

dotal content as rhetorical “filler,”³ it is important to recognize that this common element of artistic biography (included since the time of Pliny’s *Historia naturalis* in AD 70), was not only included to divert and amuse readers, but also could encapsulate exemplary character traits which might additionally instruct or inspire them.⁴ True, at times such passages seem rather unbelievable, and undeniably were often embellished for narrative affect; nevertheless, we must also recognize that anecdotes are ultimately “pointed toward or rooted in the real” as Fineman has observed (57). The recurrence of certain types of anecdotes and topoi (such as the artist’s “discovery”) in artistic biography of the early modern period have led Kris and Kurz, and more recently Soussloff, to argue that such passages in fact reveal that culture’s general conception of the prototypical “great” artist through this process of mythologization.⁵ It should be noted, however, that their “great” artist is male, for they entirely overlook life stories of women. This essay will thus advance an investigation of how the anecdotal characterizations of female artists relate to the biographical paradigm of the male artist.

According to Kris and Kurz, anecdotal passages relating how a youthful artist’s talent is fatefully “discovered” by a passerby (as the young Giotto’s drawings were noticed by Cimabue) were fundamental to the mythologizing of the male artist, for they revealed how his talent was an innate gift, rather than the result of excellent teaching (26–30). In this way, the great artist’s abilities could be associated with a divine, rather than a more mundane, earthly creator. However, there are no such parallels in the life stories of women artists prior to the

3 See, for example, Goldstein 9–18.

4 See, for example, the comments made by the eighteenth-century historian P. J. B. Nougaret in the introduction to his *Anecdotes des beaux-arts* 1.x.

5 For the purposes of this essay, I am using the term “early modern” to refer to the time-frame of 1500–1800 in western Europe.

eighteenth century since the talented female was generally seen as an aberration rather than a natural occurrence.⁶

Yet in at least three eighteenth-century life stories this perception seems to have changed, for the biographers of Giovanna Fratellini, Maria Barbò, and Rosalba Carriera emphasize how their talents were recognized when they were young girls. Fratellini (1666–1731), a miniaturist from Florence whose life story is included in the Francesco Moücke's 1762 *Serie di ritratti degli eccellenti pittori* was said to have showed signs of an unusual talent from infancy. Three individuals are in fact given credit for recognizing and encouraging her artistic potential: first, an uncle who served the Grand Duchess Vittoria della Rovere and took Giovanna to the Florentine court to amuse the *principessa*; then the Grand Duchess herself, who adopted the young girl and raised her as a court lady skilled in various arts, including drawing; and finally Padre Ippolito Galantini, who was selected to direct Giovanna in miniature painting. In this rarefied court setting, one might expect that the good Padre would have treated the young female pupil simply as a talented amateur; but Moücke offers the following insightful observation: "he [Padre Galantini] thought to not take her as a simple dilettante, but to form of her an expert professional, administering to her the true precepts of Art" (4.210, my translation). What is most significant here is the distinction made between treating Fratellini as a serious woman artist with the ability to learn the "precepts" or theory of art, versus the more typical association of a woman with dilettantism, an issue that undoubtedly became more prominent in this century, given the increasing numbers of women amateur artists.⁷ Such comments could furthermore serve as a precedent and inspiration for other women contemplating a professional career in the arts.

6 To date, I have checked approximately sixty biographical compendia written in Europe between 1500–1800 for life stories of women artists. Some of these life stories can be found in my *Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550–1800: An Anthology* (Ashgate).

7 Chadwick 162; Sutherland Harris and Nochlin 41.

Although virtually unknown today, another miniaturist, Maria Barbò (1700–34), was considered significant enough by the writer Giambattista Biffi (1736–1807) to be given a relatively lengthy three-page entry in his comprehensive biographical compendium of artists of Cremona, written in the 1770s.⁸ Following a brief discussion of her education, the author relates at some length how the painter Angelo Masserotti noticed that the young Maria would regularly sit-in on the art lessons he gave to her brother and intently observe the instruction. Subsequently, drawings of trees, dolls, and houses that she had sketched on scraps of letters were found in her possession. Masserotti detected the incipient skill of the young artist in these drawings, and immediately ran to tell Maria's father about this unique "discovery," begging permission to instruct the young girl, to which the father consented (316). This anecdote, while impossible to corroborate, is an extraordinarily atypical view of the formation of a woman artist. While the young girl is initially relegated to the role of passive observer, Maria is given direct credit for her interest in and skill at art: Biffi writes, regarding her regular presence at her brother's art lessons, that "at first it was thought Chance guided her there; but then it was the diligence in attending and the resolute attention that she gave which attracted the eyes and the observation of the teacher to the little girl."⁹ Notably, these qualities of inner desire and dedication, antithetical to the early modern belief that women were by nature passive and inconstant, were often associated by biographers with successful male artists.¹⁰ Biffi furthermore indicates that

8 See pp. 315–18.

9 "Si pensò da principio l'azzardo ve la conducesse; ma poi e l'assiduità nell'intervenirvi e l'attenzione decisa che vi prestava attirarono gli occhi e le osservazioni del Maestro sopra la fanciulla" (316).

10 Kris and Kurz provide a brief summary of biographical texts emphasizing the (often extreme) dedication of male artists to their artistic endeavors (125). Interestingly, Honig has recently shown that women artists in the eighteenth-century Dutch biographical com-

Maria was endowed with a “natural ability” and a “great inclination” for painting—remarks that stand in sharp contrast to the persistent view of the Renaissance writer Boccaccio, who viewed women artists as miraculous aberrations because of the belief that “art is very much alien to the mind of women, and these things cannot be accomplished without a great deal of talent, which in women is usually very scarce.”¹¹ To support his unusual claim of a young girl having an innate talent for art, Biffi relates that Maria’s first drawings were independent sketches of familiar objects, which again deviates from the standard biographical line that the beginning works of young artists, and in particular women, were *copies* of other artworks.¹² Although this anecdote is rather hyperbolically reported, its validity and importance as a mythic prefiguration of later success is underscored by the author, who asserts in conclusion that such “imagined expectations” of Barbò’s abilities were indeed born out in her subsequent artistic production.¹³

The better-known Venetian portraitist Rosalba Carriera (1675–1757) is also the subject of a discovery anecdote in Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d’Argenville’s account of her life, included in his 1762 *Abrégé de la vie des plus fameux peintres*.¹⁴ The author, who met Carriera during her 1720–21 sojourn in Paris (1.316), describes her trans-

pendia of Houbraken and van Gool were similarly credited with a consistently strong inner desire to create art (32).

11 Boccaccio 131. As Crampe-Casnabet has summarized, Enlightenment philosophers similarly posited that most women were “incapable of invention and devoid of genius,” two qualities that were essential to be deemed a “great” artist (3.329).

12 On the standard description of early modern women artists as copyists, see Jacobs 58.

13 Both Biffi (317) and Grasselli (28) identify specific works by Barbò; however, as Gregori notes (in Biffi 318), and as my research so far corroborates, no extant works have yet been identified.

14 Dézallier d’Argenville 1.314–17.

formation from humble lace maker to enlightened fine artist in the following prophetic glimpse of her future greatness:

Lacemaking was the first occupation of the girl; but Heaven had destined her for more elevated things. Moreover, love couldn't divert her from her purpose; a woman, under the aegis of ugliness, is safe from lovers. Inspiration pierced thus through the small amusements of youth, which really began to bore her. She took it upon herself to copy a figure that her father had designed for the heading of a sonnet [i.e. an engraving]; a friend, who learned to draw from a foreign painter, made her master see the drawing that Rosalba had made; his astonishment was extreme; he glimpsed there the excellence to which she would arrive one day. This master encouraged her to continue, and gave her several of his drawings to copy: it is thus that auspicious beginnings give proof of the great artists.¹⁵

This anecdote may initially seem to perpetuate the early modern stereotype of the woman artist: first and foremost, she is chaste and thus cannot be deterred from her dedication to art by earthly love; and second, she (unlike Maria Barbò) learns by copying the works of male artists. However, there are some significant divergences from the standard characterization. First, Dézallier d'Argenville undeni-

15 "Le travail du point de Venise fut la premiere occupation de sa fille; mais le Ciel l'avoit destiné pour des choses plus élevées. D'ailleurs, l'amour ne pouvoit la détourner de sa destination; une femme, sous l'égide de la laideur, est à l'abri des amans. L'inspiration perça donc à travers les petits amusemens du premier âge, qui commençoient fort à l'ennuyer. Elle s'avisa de copier une figure que son pere avoit dessinée à la tête d'un sonnet; une amie, qui apprenoit à dessiner d'un peintre étranger, fit voir à son maître le dessein qu'avoit fait la Rosa Alba; son étonnement fut extrême; il y entrevit l'excellence où elle parviendroit un jour. Ce maître l'encouragea à continuer, and lui donna plusieurs de ses desseins à copier: c'est ainsi que d'heureux commencemens annoncent les grands artistes" (1.314).

I would like to thank Professor Matt Senior at the University of Minnesota-Morris for checking my translations from Dézallier d'Argenville's texts; any remaining errors are my own.

ably states that it was a *female* friend (“une amie”) of Rosalba who first notices her talent, taking the exceptional drawing to show her art teacher.

Although impossible to corroborate, this seemingly trivial detail is nevertheless telling, for it acknowledges that a female, rather than the standard male father figure, could be endowed with the heightened aesthetic perception to actively intervene in a young woman’s path to artistic greatness.

Prior to this female discovery, though, is another remarkable statement: the young Rosalba is said to have turned from childish activities to the more intellectual pursuit of art due to the intervention of “inspiration,” which to my knowledge is unprecedented in the biographical portrayal of a woman artist.¹⁶ Dezallier d’Argenville’s comment is extraordinarily significant, for traditional biographical references to “inspired” male artists were a means of associating him with a divine Creator, thus elevating his status to that of a *deus artifex* (Kris and Kurz 49–60). But to suggest that a secular woman was “inspired” was virtually impossible prior to the eighteenth century due to the prevailing scientific belief in humoral theory. Initially formulated by Aristotle and Galen, and later promoted by the Renaissance physician Juan Huarte, humoral theory posited that the typical female physiological constitution was cold and moist (hence her paler, fleshier appearance), the opposite of that of men, whose hot-dry qualities were more conducive to intellectual fervor engendered by inspiration.¹⁷ By the eighteenth century, though, humoralism was becoming outmoded due to new medical discoveries, which may

16 It should be noted that there are visual examples of inspired women artists, such as the allegorical figure of *La Pittura* on the reverse of Felice Casoni’s 1611 *Portrait Medal of Lavinia Fontana* (London, British Museum), and Artemisia Gentileschi’s possible self-portrayal as the *Allegory of Painting* (c. 1638–39, London, Kensington Palace).

17 For an excellent overview of humoral theory, especially as it related to women, see Filipczak as well as Maclean 28–46.

have made it more plausible for the author to now link Rosalba with the tradition of inspired male artists.¹⁸

But there was a price that the woman artist paid for being gifted, at least according to her male biographers, and that was ugliness. Dézallier d'Argenville emphasizes Carriera's purportedly unattractive appearance with two comments: in the above-quoted anecdote ("a woman, under the aegis of ugliness, is safe from lovers"), as well as more blatantly in the opening line of the life story: "Beauty, which is the usual lot of women, was not at all that of Signora Rosalba Carriera."¹⁹ Nor was he alone in this negative appraisal; an anecdote concerning the artist's ugliness is related in Girolamo Zanetti's 1781 *Elogio di Rosalba Carriera*²⁰ as well as being visually demonstrated by a scathing caricature from the hand of Anton Maria Zanetti, a friend of Carriera's (fig. 1).²¹ This bluntness represents an astonishing reversal from the Renaissance, when women artists were universally praised

18 On the gradual decline of humoral theory in early modern Europe, see Temkin and Jackson.

19 "La beauté, qui est le partage ordinaire des femmes, ne fut point celui de la Signora Rosa Alba Carriera" (Dézallier d'Argenville 1.314).

20 Girolamo Zanetti recounts an anecdote in which the Emperor Charles VI of Austria remarks to a court artist upon being introduced to Carriera that "She may well be worthy, my Bertoli, . . . but she is very ugly" (18–19, my translation). Carriera is said to have reacted with quiet good humor, realizing that the emperor had not been exactly well-endowed with good looks himself. In this way, Zanetti not only introduces a note of humor into the life story but also illustrates Carriera's self-confidence and rationality.

21 The eighteenth-century Italian historian Anton Maria Zanetti (a cousin to the artist of the same name) also does not refrain from noting Carriera's lack of physical attractiveness in his brief life story of the artist, albeit with a bit more diplomacy: "Quanto avara le fu natura negli esterni doni, tanto più colmolla d'interne doti rarissime" [As ungenerous as nature was in giving her external gifts, so much more it endowed her with very rare internal gifts] (448).



Fig. 1. Anton Maria Zanetti, *Caricature of Rosalba Carriera*, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice. © 2002, Fondazione Giorgio Cini/Fotoflash di Zennaro Elisabetta.

for their beauty and desirability, whether merited or not.²² One might reason that in a period of heightened empiricism and greater visibility via the print medium, there was an increased emphasis on authorial veracity;²³ in fact, the image of Carriera included in Dézallier d'Argenville's publication is not especially alluring.²⁴ Yet what is more perplexing is that this perceived ugliness was not limited to Carriera's life story: Dézallier also comments on the unattractiveness of the artists Elisabeth-Sophie Chéron and Maria Sibylla Merian, as does an anonymous Italian writer concerning the Venetian musician Anna Maria della Pietà, resulting in a new eighteenth-century topos of the ugly but gifted woman.²⁵ What might have provoked this volte-face in the verbal portrayal of the woman artist?

A number of factors might be cited: perhaps most apparently, the topos of physical ugliness provided a rationale for a woman's unusual choice in preferring a public career as a single, professional artist rather than conceding to the social norm of marriage and motherhood. Her physical undesirability could be seen as a positive aspect by "keeping her safe from lovers" who could complicate or possibly curtail her artistic creativity. More surprising, though, is that the neoplatonic association between outer beauty and inner virtue was now replaced by another equation in which ugliness became the exterior sign of

22 On the verbal and visual portrayals of Renaissance women artists, see King. The idealized verbal images could at times contradict the portrait illustrations of the artist: see, for example, the image of Properzia de' Rossi in Vasari (1.856) or Marietta Robusti in Ridolfi (97).

23 This link between empiricism and biographical realism is made in relation to English eighteenth-century writing by Ruth Perry in her edition of George Ballard (30), but would seem to be appropriate in this Italian context also.

24 The engraved portrait of Carriera by B. Lépicier is based on a 1716 self-portrait (Dézallier d'Argenville 1.314).

25 Dézallier d'Argenville 3.64 and 4.241; and for della Pietà see Berdes 159. I hope to pursue this topic further in a separate study.

intelligence, as the entry for “femme” in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* of 1751 reveals: “Praise for a woman’s character or mind is almost always proof of her ugliness.”²⁶ Here, culturally codified in a scholarly reference source, this powerful statement certainly reflects a lingering misogyny toward the gifted female, who could only be considered “great” if she were defeminized in terms of physical appearance. It would not be until early in the nineteenth century that these antipodal traits are merged, with de Rossi praising Angelica Kauffmann for both her beauty *and* her intelligence.²⁷

Dézallier d’Argenville’s life story of Carriera includes another unparalleled narrative in the characterization of a woman artist, and concerns her relationship with an aspiring student. Teacher-student anecdotes occur relatively frequently in the biographical accounts of male artists and could serve various functions, such as establishing artistic lineage or dramatizing the competitive clashes between master and apprentice.²⁸ However, I have yet to find an analogous case in the life story of a female artist prior to the eighteenth century, even though the Baroque painter Elisabetta Sirani, to name just one example, had numerous female students. This previous biographical disparity may reflect the prevailing prejudice that women lacked the intelligence to be educators, as well as a latent desire to view these gifted women as isolated phenomena, thereby posing less of a threat to the male artistic hegemony.

26 Desmahis 6.472: “L’éloge du caractère ou de l’esprit d’une femme est presque toujours une preuve de laideur.” English translation Crampe-Casnabet 3.323. Kant also associated women’s intelligence with ugliness in his 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (as cited in Battersby 177).

27 De Rossi 32 and 108. Yet even here the author qualifies his remarks about the artist’s beauty: “non potea dirsi che avesse una compita bellezza, ma la sua figura era all’estremo avvenente” [one could not say of her that she had a formal beauty; nevertheless her figure was extremely attractive].

28 Kris and Kurz 24 and 123.

The gender barrier is broken, though, in the following passage from the French biographer's text:

An individual from a good family, who wanted to learn to draw, not being able to make Rosalba consent to take students, decided to present herself at her house in the guise of a chambermaid, knowing that she had need of one; our artist took her on her good appearance. The other [the young woman] who watched her paint without ceasing, and who worked in her private room, learned this talent in a short time; Rosalba, upon seeing this, could not refuse her advice to this incipient Muse. Ultimately, the mystery was revealed to her, and this girl has become so skilled in miniature painting, that a Prince of Germany invited her to come [to his court] with a generous stipend.²⁹

As historians, our initial reaction may be to dismiss this entertaining narrative as mythical in nature, and therefore essentially useless; yet, is it really that unbelievable? In fact not, when one considers that the seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painter Maria van Oosterwijck also had a maidservant who learned the art of painting from her mistress.³⁰ Although Carriera's student is unnamed and has not been previously identified, Dézallier d'Argenville is likely referring to her primary protégé, Felicità Sartori Hoffmann (c. 1715–1760), who stayed in the Carriera household from 1729–1741 until she left to

29 "Une personne de bonne famille, qui vouloit apprendre à dessiner, ne pouvant faire consentir la Rosa Alba à prendre des écoliers, se déterminà à se présenter chez elle en qualité de camériste, sachant qu'elle en avoit besoin d'une; notre artiste la prit sur sa bonne mine. L'autre qui la regardoit sans cesse peindre, and qui travailloit en son particulier, apprit ce talent en peu de tems; ce que voyant la Rosa Alba, elle ne put refuser ses conseils à cette Muse naissante. Enfin, on lui découvrit le mystère, and cette fille est devenue si habile dans la miniature, qu'un Prince d'Allemagne la fit venir avec de gros appointemens" (Dézallier d'Argenville 1.316).

30 On van Oosterwijck and her maidservant Geertje Pieters, see Lindenburg.

serve as court artist to the Prince Elector of Saxony, Augustus III.³¹ In fact the artist's correspondence reveals that Felicità initially worked in the household as a maidservant, thereby giving further credence to the anecdote.³²

Rather than focus solely on corroboration, though, we should consider this passage in terms of a primary function of the early modern anecdote: how does it serve to characterize the artist? One of the most surprising elements in the narrative is Rosalba's refusal to accept a female student—clearly a most ungenerous action. Although the author indicates that Carriera ultimately accepted and encouraged the young artist, her initial unwillingness is quite contrary to descriptions of the prototypical male artist-hero, who is often praised for generosity toward his students, even to the point of neglecting his own work, as in the case of the seventeenth-century artist Annibale Carracci.³³ The exceptionality of this passage in Carriera's life story could be explained as a purely literary concern for heightening dramatic tension; yet it does have some basis in reality, for Rosalba indeed had relatively few students, somewhat unusual for an artist whose work was in great demand. Ultimately, while Dézallier d'Argenville's inclusion of a teacher-student anecdote links a female artist to the biographical standard of the great male artist, she is still negatively differenced, given the narrative's implication that young

31 Very little research has been done to date on Sartori; according to Sutherland Harris, four of her works can be found in the Dresden Gemäldegalerie, and one is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum (162 n.15).

32 See Carriera's correspondence dated 4 July 1729 and 29 April 1730, which specifically mentions a young woman named "Felicità" who serves the family's household, and whom Sani identifies as being Felicità Sartori (*Rosalba Carriera: lettere, diari, frammenti* 2.499, 519). This evidence is furthermore consistent with Sartori's documented presence in the Carriera household as of 1729.

33 See, for example, Bellori's resounding praise of Annibale Carracci's dedication to his students (61).

women (such as the maid Felicità), can only become painters by means of deception and cunning.

This subtle undermining of the gifted woman artist is also evidenced in Maria Barbó's life story. Biffi concludes his otherwise encomiastic account of Barbó with a lengthy anecdote relating how she died at the age of thirty-four, the result of a nearly unstoppable nosebleed triggered by seeing her father faint when he was visiting her in the monastery (317–18). The author undoubtedly was intending to show the intensity of Maria's devotion to her father with this anecdote, but the incident still comes across as an almost ludicrous example of feminine hypersensitivity and emotionalism.

Giovanna Fratellini's death at the age of sixty-five is similarly said to have been induced from an overly emotional response, in this case following the death of her beloved artist-son. Rather than fall victim to a hemorrhaging nose, though, Fratellini suffered from a persistent melancholia that left her unable to paint.³⁴ There is likely at least a kernel of truth to these death-stories, and they do elicit some sympathy from the reader; however, the narrative treatments emphasize female debility rather than fortitude, leaving a bitter aftertaste to what are otherwise affirming accounts of talented women.

Nowhere is this ambivalence better demonstrated than in Anton Maria Zanetti's brief *vita* of Carriera included in his *Della pittura veneziana* (1771).³⁵ He highly praises her portraits, and indirectly associates Rosalba with the gifted male artist-type by noting her "exalted" genius, as well as commenting on the hard work and suffering which led to her artistic excellence. Yet much of this praise is subsumed by a negative characterization of the artist found toward the conclusion

34 Moücke 4.217. To my knowledge there are no studies of Fratellini's oeuvre, so we cannot yet corroborate whether she stopped working before her death.

35 Pp. 447–50. Zanetti (1706–78), not to be confused with his artist-cousin of the same name, may have also known Carriera personally given his interest in art and his Venetian residence, but he goes unmentioned in the artist's extensive correspondence.

of the *vita*. There Zanetti relates that Rosalba became blind later in her career; however, not only did she lose her sight, according to the author, but also her mind.³⁶ He elaborates upon this rather cryptic comment in an anecdotal passage which is literally marginalized as a footnote to the narrative:

It is really worth philosophizing about the case of this illustrious lady, whose spirit was in every age oppressed from time to time by natural, severe sadness, in the midst of a thousand ideas of felicity and happiness; and in the end that questionable behavior happened so much, perhaps by the weakness of the organs in aging, that she fell into an entire blinding of reason. A few years before [this happened] she made her own portrait with a garland of leaves, and having been asked what she meant to signify with that, she responded, that it was *Tragedy*, and that Rosalba must end tragically, as it was in real life.³⁷

As Malamani first noted in 1928, Zanetti is referring here to one of Carriera's last works, a self-portrait in which she has taken on the guise of an allegorical representation of *Tragedy* (fig. 2).³⁸ While

36 "Con pastelli appunto fatta è la maggior parte delle opere sue; avendo abbandonata la miniatura, come di troppo aggraviò alla vista, ch'ella poi sventuratamente perdette affatto alcuni anni prima di morire, e con la vista il senno" [It was precisely with pastels that she made the majority of her work, having abandoned miniatures as too aggravating to the sight, which she then unfortunately lost entirely some years before dying, and with the sight the sense] (449).

37 "È da filosofare nei casi di questa illustre donna, lo spirito della quale fu in ogni età oppresso di tempo in tempo da naturali fierissime tristezze, in mezzo a mille idee di felicità e d'allegrezza; e in fine arrivò a tanto questo mal costume, forse per la debolezza degli organi nel crescer degli anni, che cadde in un intero abbagliamento della ragione. Pochi anni prima fec'ella il proprio ritratto con una ghirlanda di foglie; e venendole chiesto che volesse significare per ciò, rispose, ch'era quella la *Tragedia*; e che Rosalba dovea finire tragicamente, come fu in verità" (449).

38 On this portrait, see Malamani 20 and Sani, *Rosalba Carriera* 324. Malamani dates the portrait to c. 1738–40, but in my opinion,



Fig. 2. Rosalba Carriera, *Self-portrait as Tragedy* (c. 1746), Accademia, Venice.
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the artist had enjoyed an enormously successful career, the death of her beloved sister in 1737, the impending loss of her vision despite cataract surgeries, and her lifelong struggles with depression (explicitly evidenced in the artist's writings) had taken their toll on the artist, finding poignant expression in this somber image, perhaps the most affecting of Carriera's oeuvre.³⁹ The *Self-portrait as Tragedy* is also particularly striking due to its masculinized aspect, especially apparent when compared to a nearly contemporary self-portrait now at Windsor Castle, where the artist appears in more feminine garb: ruffled lace, fur cloak, curled hair, and teardrop earrings (fig. 3). By purposefully linking herself to the male gender in the former portrait, and in particular adopting the bust-length guise of an ancient philosopher, I would contend that Carriera has brilliantly related her melancholia to the more positive aspect of contemplative genius. Beginning with Aristotle, the eccentric behavior and creative furor of melancholia had frequently been associated with great male artists (such as Michelangelo, or Annibale Carracci),⁴⁰ yet it was rarely, if ever, used to characterize a female artist in the early modern period, thus making Rosalba's visual statement all the more remarkable.⁴¹ Undoubtedly this distinction was due to the persistent Galenic tradition which asserted that it was virtually impossible for a female to

Sani more accurately dates the image to c. 1746 on stylistic grounds.

39 See, in particular, the artist's journal entries from 1720 and 1721 and correspondence from 1737 and 1740 in Sani, *Rosalba Carriera: lettere, diari, frammenti* 2.630, 657, 768, and 778.

40 On melancholy and the male artist, see Wittkower 98–132.

41 Jacobs (68–82) has argued that the Renaissance sculptor Properzia de' Rossi suffered from melancholia, albeit of the lovesick variety; however, I interpret Vasari's life story of the artist differently, in that Properzia did not cease sculpting due to a malaise brought on by unrequited love, but rather due to the envious animosity of a colleague. I intend to further consider the issue of female artists and melancholia in another study. See further on the issue of female melancholy and genius Battersby.



Fig. 3. Rosalba Carriera, *Self-portrait as an Old Woman* (c. 1745), Windsor Castle. The Royal Collection © 2007, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

have a cold and dry humoral constitution, the physiological prerequisite for the melancholic temperament. Zanetti's rather insensitive comments reflect this prejudice, for he views her bouts of depression as "questionable behavior" and suggests that they resulted from physical debility, rather than associating them with artistic genius. Unfortunately, his further claim that she went insane has been uncritically echoed by later art historians, even though the artist's dictated correspondence and wills demonstrate that she maintained her lucidity.⁴²

While Carriera's visual life story, represented in the *Self-portrait as Tragedy*, was undoubtedly a poignant yet also positive source of inspiration to her talented student, Felicità Sartori Hoffmann (to whom the painting was later given),⁴³ Zanetti's whispered anecdotal innuendo, accentuating the physical and mental weakness of the female artist, results in a *vita* that is far from exemplary. For despite the increased integration of women artists into the traditional concept of male artistic greatness, noted in the accounts of their discovery, training, teacher-student relationships, and even physical appearance, these eighteenth-century life stories remind us that male and female artistic ability was not yet perceived with twenty/twenty vision.⁴⁴

42 Girolamo Zanetti is the only other eighteenth-century biographer of the artist who maintains that she lost her mind (21); Möücke, however, specifically states that Carriera remained "illuminata nella mente" after her blindness was irreversible (4.245), and Dézallier d'Argenville praises the artist for her fortitude in the face of blindness (1.317).

43 Zanetti, *Della pittura veneziana* 449.

44 This essay is a significantly revised version of a paper entitled "Assessing Anecdotes in the Life stories of Italian Women Artists of the 17th & 18th Centuries," given at the 2002 College Art Association conference (Philadelphia). My thanks go to Dr. Liana Cheney for inviting me to participate in this session. I would also like to thank Professors Kim Rhodes and Pieranna Garavaso for their perceptive comments on earlier drafts. Research for this paper was made possible by a Faculty Summer Research Fellowship and a McKnight

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